

Set Design for the Final Scene in *The Magic Flute*

Michael Lyon

Stage Directions. *The stage is transformed into a sunburst; Sarastro appears on high; Tamino and Pamina are in priestly robes, surrounded on both sides by the Egyptian priests; the Three Boys offer flowers.* (2.30)

This set design was made in the same eclectic spirit that Mozart and Schikaneder used in the creation of their opera and reflects some of the various influences that were current in their time. In designing the Temple of the Priests of the Sun, I have portrayed the Egyptian motif explicit in the text as a typical New Kingdom temple pylon doorway with massive wooden doors and gold inset panels as mentioned in contemporary texts. The winged sun disk of Horus the Behedite over the door is an appropriate symbol for such a temple. The two red granite *tekhenu* or obelisks are in the same proportions as the one erected by Senwesret I in c. 1950 bc at Annu, the sacred city of the sun god, called On by the Hebrews and Heliopolis by the Greeks. The gold caps at the tops of the obelisks were intended to catch the rays of the sun while the shaft itself was described by Pliny as a symbolic representation of the sun's rays.¹

Unlike the pseudo-hieroglyphic inscriptions appearing in so many *Magic Flute* set designs over the centuries, these inscriptions actually say something worth reading. Starting with the top of the right-hand obelisk and repeated on the left (but reversed so as to face into the sacred axis leading into the temple), we see the gold Horus falcon on the *serekh* palace façade enclosing a royal name, with the pillars of heaven motif familiar to us from the Book of Abraham's Facsimile 1, figure 11, at the bottom. The royal name in this case is a punning spelling of Sarastro, using the glyph *Sah*, the name for Osiris as the constellation Orion, while the second syllable, *Ra*, is the Sun God. The remainder is my clumsy approximation of his

name. The name Sarastro is easily recognized as the Persian prophet Zoroaster (itself the Greek misspelling of the Old Persian *Zarathushtra*). What is not as well known is that Mozart played the role of Zoroaster in costume during a 1786 carnival ball, where he handed out “Fractions of Zoroaster’s Fragments,” a short collection of jests and social criticism.²

The serekh enclosure is followed by the usual Egyptian formula, so the first part of the inscription reads, “Sarastro is given life like the sun for all eternity.” The difficulty of writing foreign names in hieroglyphs is particularly evident in artifacts from the Persian and Ptolemaic domination of Egypt, about 300 bc, the period from which the rest of the obelisk inscription is taken. Hugh Nibley translates this text from the temple tomb of the priest Petosiris, who apparently, like Mozart and Schikaneder, had an eclectic interest in new influences from abroad.³ His temple demonstrates the effort of his artists to combine elements of Egyptian traditional designs with the new Greco-Persian art. The text seems appropriate to this opera, and so I have inscribed it on the two obelisks:

Come, I will instruct you in the Way of God. I will guide you in the Way of Life, the true (right) way of him who obeys God. Happy is he who guides his heart in that way! He whose heart is firm in the Way of God, whose existence on earth is assured. He whose soul is filled with the fear of God, great is happiness upon the earth!

Nibley says this text “is entirely in the spirit of the First Psalm of David,” raising all sorts of questions about the sources of the wisdom literature of Egypt and Israel. It is well to remember that no culture is independent of those around it, and a belief in the “purity” of any work of art or literature is misguided, to say the least.

As I envision this final scene of *The Magic Flute*, Tamino and Pamina enter from their completion of the ordeal of fire and water; the temple doors stand closed. After they are clothed in their white priestly robes, they begin to mount the seven steps to Sarastro, who stands waiting for them at the top. The first step is in the shape of the intersection of a circle and square of equal area, an ancient Greek geometric problem with religious implications. As they ascend to the triumphant music of the chorus, the heavy doors slowly open, revealing the great light shining through a sun symbol on the wall of the *sanctum*. The light dims slightly to allow us to see the large image of the Two who are One: an image representing Isis and Osiris of the text, but visually it shows the Chinese dieties Fu xi and Nu wa.⁴ He holds an uplifted try-square, a symbol of the square four-cornered earth, while she is holding the compass that draws out the great circle of heaven, for it is in the marriage of the round heaven and the square earth that all creation comes forth. These tools were certainly familiar to Mozart

and Schikaneder as Freemasons. Though the compass and square do not have the same significance to the Freemasons that the Chinese attribute to them, they are the preeminent symbols of Freemasonry even today and can represent the goal of making spiritual aspirations (the compass) triumph over physical passions (the square), as well as other moral principles. The use of a Chinese image may seem extreme even in such an eclectic setting, but by a gratifying coincidence the entwined serpent tails of Fu xi and Nu wa are paralleled by a small bronze statue of Isis-Thermouthis and Osiris-Agathodaimon with serpent tails from the period of great religious and artistic synthesis in Egypt during the first century after Christ.⁵ Their tails are tied together in the Hercules knot, a symbol of their eternal marriage. The hybrid style, Hellenistic heads on Egyptian cobra bodies, is a result of the desire to combine the most important elements of the great religious traditions then in constant contact with each other. This eclectic syncretism is similar to the development of Freemasonry in England centuries later.

When Tamino and Pamina reach the top of the stairs they turn and face the audience; Sarastro symbolically relinquishes his power by stepping down from the top step. The new rulers of the Temple take a golden try-square and silver compass from pillows held by kneeling servants and hold them up, echoing the image behind them as the triumphal music concludes.

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1. Pliny, *Natural History* 36.14.

2. Hans-Josef Irmen, *Mozart's Masonry and the Magic Flute*, trans. Ruth Ohm and Chantal Spenke ([Zülpich]: Prisca; University of Essen, 1996), 142–44.

3. The translation appears in Hugh Nibley, *Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), 68. The hieroglyphics I inscribed on the obelisks appear in an excavation report by E. Lefebvre, *Le Tombeau de Petosiris* (Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1924), 38, line 62.

4. My image is based on banners found in seventh-century tombs in western China. Aurel Stein, *Innermost Asia*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1928), 2:plate 109 and description on 707.

5. Bronze statue of Isis-Thermouthis and Sarapis-Agathodaimon, Staatliche Museen, Berlin.